

Iran's Foreign Minister Sacked: Did WikiLeaks End Mottaki's Career?

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Bruised egos, embarrassed faces, public and private indignation at the audacity of Julian Assange, clarifications offered and apologies extended; until now, these have been the reactions of world leaders and diplomats to the unprecedented release of WikiLeaks cables. But on Monday, they may have claimed their first victim.

In the middle of an official state visit to Senegal, Manouchehr Mottaki was unceremoniously dismissed as Iran's foreign minister by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He only learned of it through media reports. The MIT-educated head of the country's Atomic Energy Agency, Ali Akbar Salehi (always Ahmadinejad's preferred candidate for the position) was quickly named interim foreign minister.

Mottaki was sacked exactly one week after Iran held its first talks in over a year with the P5+1 powers in Geneva (the five members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany), and six months after yet another round of economic sanctions were imposed by the U.N. Security Council over Iran's contentious nuclear program. Presciently, Mottaki was absent from the Geneva summit.

The indecorous manner in which he was ousted aside, what was the reason behind Mottaki's dismissal?

Ahmadinejad's office provided no official explanation, but several theories exist.

One was that Mottaki was a bit too compromising for Tehran's liking.

In early December, both Mottaki and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attended the Manama Dialogue, a three-day security conference organized by the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Bahrain. There, Clinton mentioned that Iran is entitled to enrich uranium and develop a civilian nuclear energy program provided it was done in a "responsible manner." Mottaki characterized this as a "step forward." On a subsequent visit to Athens, he remarked there were "certain shared positions" where cooperation could take place.

A second and more credible supposition is that Ahmadinejad wants to fill his cabinet with loyalists and sycophants.

"Mottaki is the one and only man (in the cabinet) who does not belong to Ahmadinejad's group of ministers with mostly intelligence and IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) background," said Massoumeh Torfeh of London's School of Oriental and African Studies as quoted by Reuters.

Ahmadinejad wasted little time in finding ways to undermine Mottaki. By appointing six foreign envoys that report directly to him, Ahmadinejad managed to bypass the foreign ministry entirely (they were eventually downgraded to advisors after Ayatollah Khamenei intervened).

Mottaki is also a close associate of current parliament speaker Ali Larijani, who has butted heads with Ahmadinejad on more than one occasion. Among other complaints, Larijani argues that power is being increasingly consolidated by the president at the expense of parliamentary consultation and oversight.

It may be, as Iran 's Press TV [reported](#), that Mottaki's exit was long in the works. This is likely correct, but is it coincidence that it came on the heels of WikiLeaks cables that revealed the Arab regimes' estrangement and hostility toward Tehran and its nuclear ambitions? (Feelings not shared by the Arab public incidentally). To hide his embarrassment, Ahmadinejad was forced to assert the divulged memos were part of an "American conspiracy" in a game of "an intelligence and psychological" warfare.

It is true that the comments made by Arab potentates to U.S. officials, repeatedly goading the U.S. to attack Iran , belied their public declarations of friendship and brotherhood.

The Saudi ambassador to the U.S., Adel al-Jubeir, relayed that King Abdullah urged Washington to "cut the head of the snake" while Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed said Ahmadinejad—whom he referred to as "Hitler"—was "going to take us to war" and must be stopped at all costs. "Bomb Iran or live with an Iranian bomb" was the exhortation that came out of Jordan .

The real fear of nations like Bahrain , Kuwait , Egypt , Jordan and Saudi Arabia is that Iran will inspire oppressed Arab Shia Muslims to rise against monarchy and dictatorship as their co-religionists did in 1979 across the Persian Gulf . They also fear that the growing popularity of Iranian-backed groups like Hezbollah will erode their own authority and influence. This repression is particularly severe in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia .

What the Arab regimes fail to realize is that instead of regarding Arab Shia as fifth columnists for Iran, they should treat them with the same respect and dignity as they do Sunni citizens (however small that may be) and grant them equal rights to practice their religion. The myth of Shia disloyalty would disappear overnight were that to happen.

There was little Mottaki could do to convince the Persian Gulf monarchies they first need to address and rectify troubles within their borders, not outside of them. Nevertheless, the cables release may have been the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back and culminated in the quick end to his five-year tenure as Iran 's foreign minister.

Mottaki sudden removal is multifactorial: it points to the battle between conservatives who believe power should be vested in the Supreme Leader, clergy and parliament; and Ahmadinejad supporters, namely the IRGC, who are slowly gnawing away at their control and power. His alleged foreign policy shortcomings, like the failure to stave off a fourth round of sanctions at the U.N. or win the Arab states' confidence, were pretexts needed to expeditiously sack him.

A foreign minister who can forestall additional punitive economic measures or reassure Iran 's jittery neighbors is unlikely to be found at present; the negative political climate is simply

too great for one person to overcome. But a minister who will acquiesce to a foreign policy dictated by Ahmadinejad's inner circle and the IRGC can be. In Salehi, a willing accomplice was hired.

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